

Farm & Rural Communities



USDA

Status Report

Minority & Women Farmers In the U.S.

Farms operated by Blacks and by women are generally smaller in acreage and in sales than the national average, while Asian and Pacific Islander farms average more than double the average of sales for all U.S. farms. American Indian-operated farms tend to specialize in livestock, especially beef cattle, as do Black-operated farms. Asians and Pacific Islanders, however, specialize more frequently in fruits, vegetables, and horticultural products. Hispanic operators are concentrated in Florida and the Southwest, while most American Indians farm west of the Mississippi. Black farmers are mostly in the South, while Asians and Pacific Islanders are concentrated on the Pacific Coast and Hawaii. The number of Black-operated farms is declining at a faster rate than U.S. farms in general, while the number of farms operated by women and other minorities seems to be stable or increasing.

Information on the economic and demographic characteristics of minority and female farmers was provided by USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS) as part of the Department's effort to address their special needs. Minority farmers in 1996 had charged that USDA's program delivery system had discriminated against

minority and women farmers and contributed to the loss of minority-owned farms. The Secretary of Agriculture responded to these charges within weeks by appointing a Civil Rights Action Team (CRAT) to investigate long-standing civil rights complaints against the Department.

Much of the criticism at listening sessions held around the country targeted the extensive, and relatively autonomous, delivery system of State and county field offices and locally elected farmer committees, and the failure of USDA programs to address the special needs of minority and women farmers. A key CRAT recommendation called for investigating and modernizing the local delivery system to make it more directly accountable to USDA. Other recommendations addressed complaints about the appeals process for farmers who believe they have been treated unfairly in USDA program decisions. CRAT also recommended efforts to ensure that farm programs take account of the differing circumstances of minority and women farmers, such as targeting research and funding to small-scale and limited-resource farms and disseminating information through alternative media and in languages other than English.

Behind the recent charges of discrimination against USDA has been concern over the severe decline in the number and percentage of U.S. farms operated by minorities, particularly Blacks. The number of all U.S. farms declined 70 percent over 72 years—from 6,454,000 in 1920 to 1,925,300 in 1992—and the decline in farms run by non-Whites has been even more dramatic—from 954,300 to 43,500, a 95-percent decline. Put another way, the proportion of non-White farms among all farms in the U.S. fell from 15 percent in 1920 to 2 percent in 1992.

The decline in non-White farmers has not been evenly distributed; Black-operated farms declined most rapidly. The number of Black farmers fell dramatically from 925,700 in 1920 (1 in 7 farms) to only 18,800 in 1992 (1 in 100 farms). In recent years (1982-92) the number of Black farmers has continued to decline. In contrast, the numbers of other minority farmers, including women and Hispanics, have stabilized or increased. Whereas Black farmers accounted for 97 percent of non-White farmers in 1920, by 1992 they accounted for only 43 percent.

Some conditions that have led to the long-term decline in the number of Black farmers are common to the loss of U.S. farms in general. Agriculture's shift from a labor-intensive to a capital-intensive enterprise hastened the exit of both Black and White farm operators, most often those with operations unable to support investments in new machinery and chemical inputs. Since World War II, better-paid nonfarm jobs have drawn both Black and White farmers from the land.

Black farmers experienced a disproportionate effect from these influences since their social and economic position in the South prevented many from acquiring sufficient land to take advantage of cost-saving innovations in agricultural production. Blacks also often had limited access to information that would have enabled them to protect their land from tax, credit, inheritance, and other laws affecting landholding. For example, Black farmowners frequently left land to heirs without a will, resulting in division of a farm's ownership among a large number of children and their heirs. Such fragmented ownership could end in the loss of the farm if some heirs wished to

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sell. It also made it difficult for the one or two heirs who continued to operate the farm to secure loans, since they might not be able to show clear title to all of the land as collateral.

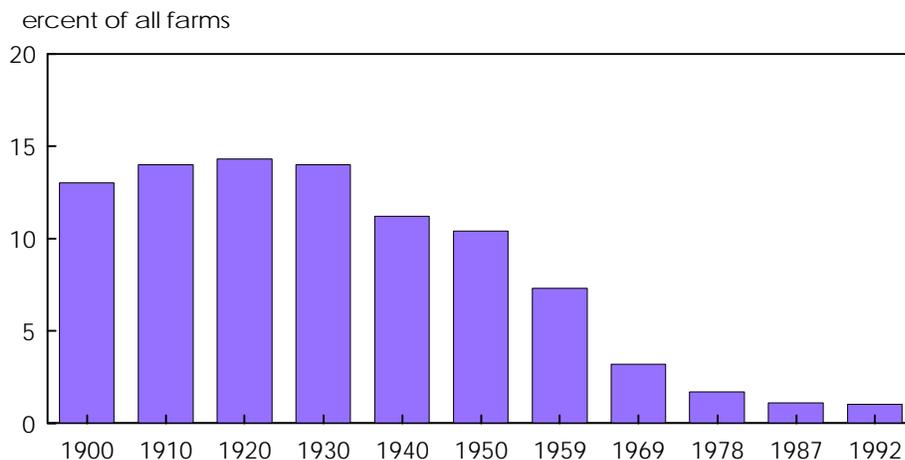
Changes in the structure of cotton farming—influenced by mechanization, damage from the boll weevil, Federal programs in the 1930's that paid landowners not to plant cotton, and the shift of cotton production to the irrigated West—further accelerated the exit of Black farmers. Many of the farm operators counted earlier in the century were sharecroppers or other tenants on southern farms. As cotton production declined in the South and required less labor, Black tenants moved out of rural areas. The exodus rapidly reduced the number of Black farmers, although Black farmers who remained were more likely to own the land they farmed.

Moreover, many Federal agricultural programs designed to assist farmers in adapting to a rapidly changing agricultural sector—e.g., loans, technical assistance, commodity programs, insurance—often failed to reach Black and other minority farmers for various reasons, including inadequate design, poor outreach, insufficient funding, and discrimination. Farmers speaking at USDA-sponsored listening sessions held as part of the Department's civil rights review in January 1997 offered evidence that such programs continue to underserve minority farmers, for most of the same reasons.

Many of these farmers also identified deterrents to entry of young Blacks into agriculture as a concern. Since many remaining Black farmers are relatively old, deterrents to entry of young Black operators—e.g., the loss of family land, through foreclosures and estate sales and difficulty in obtaining credit and technical assistance—make halting the decline in Black farming difficult.

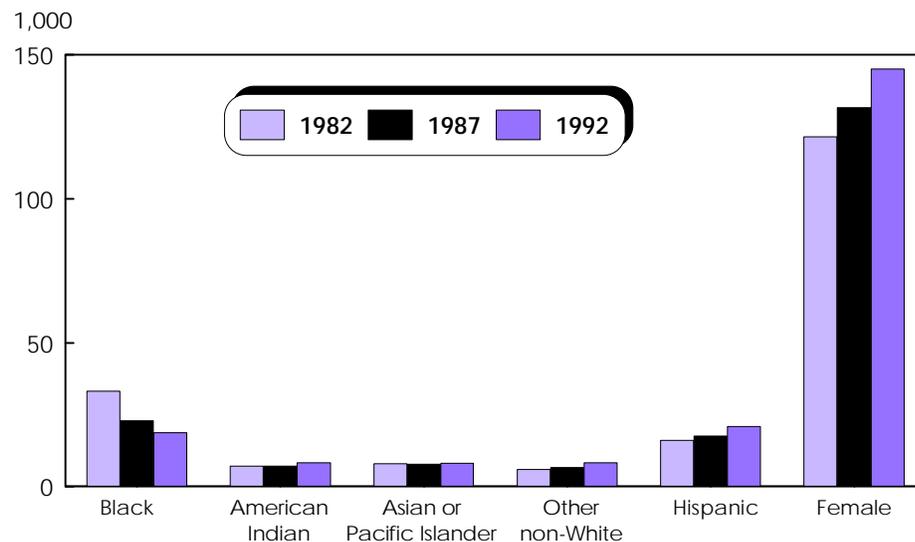
Other factors have contributed to the declining numbers of young Blacks entering farming. For example, desegregation in the 1960's, by closing Black schools and ending separate extension services for Blacks, brought an end to farm clubs and vocational agriculture programs directed specifically toward Black youths. These

Share of Farms Operated by Blacks Has Declined Dramatically



Source: U.S. Census of Agriculture.

Number of Farms Operated by Women and Other Minorities Remain Steady, in Contrast with Black-Operated Farms



Total U.S. farms in 1982: 2,240,976; 1987: 2,087,759; 1992: 1,925,300.

Source: U.S. Census of Agriculture.

Economic Research Service, USDA

events reduced the accessibility of training for a career in agriculture, and in part led to reduced demand for agricultural education by young Blacks. Combined with competition for students from newly integrated state universities, this reduced demand also contributed to reduced support for the agriculture programs at the historically Black land-grant universities. These are the institutions—the 1890 land-

grants—that have traditionally focused research on the specific problems of Black farmers and others who operate small farms with limited resources.

Although the number of farms operated by minorities and women may be stable or increasing, most, like Blacks, operate relatively small farms and suffer from the difficulties of small farms in general, with

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Characteristics of Minority & Women Farmers

Minority and women farmers are a small proportion of U.S. farmers. In 1992, the most recent census of agriculture data available, 43,500 farm operators, representing more than 2 percent of all U.S. farms, identified their *race* as non-White. Among them were 18,800 Blacks, who operated about 1 percent of all U.S. farms. Others included more than 8,300 American Indians and 8,100 Asians and Pacific Islanders. The remaining 8,200 operators identified themselves as “other,” a category largely made up of Hispanics who did not regard themselves as White, Black, or American Indian. About 21,000 farm operators identified their *ethnicity* as Hispanic, constituting just over 1 percent of U.S. farms. Women operated 145,200 farms, 7.5 percent of the U.S. total.

Farm Size

Most minority and women farmers operate small farms, but generalizing about minority farmers is difficult since characteristics of minority- and women-operated farms differ widely from group to group. Farms operated by *Blacks* in 1992 were very small, compared with the average U.S. farm or with farms run by other minorities. Black-operated farms averaged only 123 acres and less than \$20,000 per farm in gross sales per year, compared with the U.S. average of 491 acres and \$84,500. Only 12 percent of Black-operated farms had annual sales greater than \$25,000.

In contrast, the average farm operated by *American Indians* was large, 5,791 acres in 1992. This average, however, included farms owned or controlled by reservations, which have in the past been counted as a single operation. Some of these “farms” can be extensive, encompassing thousands of acres devoted to a diverse mix of range and cropland. Sales on farms run by American Indians averaged \$49,300, substantially less than the national average, and 64 percent of American Indian-operated farms had sales of less than \$10,000.

Farms operated by *Asians and Pacific Islanders* averaged only 140 acres, but tended to be large in terms of sales. Sales averaged \$192,200, more than double the U.S. average in 1992. About 45 percent of farms operated by Asians and Pacific Islanders had sales greater than \$25,000, compared with 37 percent of all U.S. farms. Three-fourths of Asians and Pacific Islanders raised high-value specialty crops, which helps explain the high average sales per farm, despite the group’s relatively low average acreage.

On average, farms operated by *Hispanics* are larger than U.S. farms in general. Hispanic-run farms averaged 591 acres in 1992, 100 acres larger than the U.S. average. Sales from Hispanic farms averaged \$115,200, or about \$30,700 more than the U.S. average. However, the share of Hispanic-run

farms with sales of at least \$25,000 was only 27 percent, compared with 37 percent for all farms. Thus, the high average sales for the Hispanic group reflected large sales by a relatively small number of farms, probably the 24 percent raising high-value specialty crops (vegetables, fruits, tree nuts, and horticultural specialties).

Farms of *female* operators were smaller on average—309 acres—than the U.S. average, although not as small as those of Blacks or Asians and Pacific Islanders. The average value of sales, however—\$35,300—fell below all other operator groups except Blacks. Two-thirds of female-operated farms had sales below \$10,000, compared with half of all U.S. farms, and only 20 percent had sales of \$25,000 or more.

Regional Concentration & Specialization

Minority and women farmers operate farms all over the U.S., but most minority groups were concentrated in particular regions, specializing in particular types of agriculture. Approximately 93 percent of *Black* farmers lived in the South (including Texas and Oklahoma). Black-owned farms specialized most frequently in beef cattle, although 10 percent of all farms run by Blacks specialized in tobacco.

Most *American Indian* operators (81 percent) lived west of the Mississippi River, although North Carolina was home to 600 Indian operators. Farms run by American Indians tended also to specialize in livestock. About 50 percent of these farms specialized in beef cattle in 1992, and another 21 percent specialized in other livestock or were general farms producing primarily livestock. Many of North Carolina’s operators, however, specialized in tobacco.

Four Pacific States—California, Hawaii, Oregon, and Washington—accounted for 84 percent of *Asian and Pacific Islander* operators. Farm operators of Japanese descent were the largest single group. In Hawaii, 2,000 Japanese farmers operated 36 percent of all farms, growing fruits, horticultural products, and vegetables.

The census of agriculture does not differentiate Asians and Pacific Islanders by national origin except in Hawaii, but by combining census of agriculture data with data gathered from the 1990 population census and interviews with local USDA offices, more detailed information on Asian farm operators can be reported. California had about 1,800 *Japanese* farm operators in 1990, concentrated primarily in Fresno County, where they raised tree fruits. The next largest concentration of Japanese-operated farms—about 60—was in the irrigated Snake River Plains of Malheur County, Oregon. Some of the farms were established following World War II by Japanese

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families displaced from the West Coast during the war. These Oregon farms specialized in irrigated row crops and dairying.

Asian Indians formed a second concentration of Asian farmers in California. A population of about 1,100 in Sutter County, three-fourths of them foreign-born, was primarily engaged in farming, largely growing tree fruits. Another, smaller group grew primarily grapes in Fresno County. A small number (fewer than 200) of *Southeast Asian* immigrants (including Hmong, a Laotian ethnic minority) also were farm operators in California in 1990. In Fresno County, recent refugees produced berries and Asian vegetables on contract using small rented plots.

Approximately 72 percent of *Hispanic* operators lived in five States in 1992—California, Colorado, Florida, New Mexico, and Texas. Some are descended from the original settlers who moved into the area during the Spanish colonial period. The most common specialization for Hispanics, as for Blacks and American Indians and for U.S. farms in general, was beef cattle. About 39 percent of Hispanic-run farms specialized in beef cattle in 1992, compared with 32 percent of all U.S. farms. The share of Hispanic-operated farms specializing in high-value specialty crops (24 percent) was three times the U.S. average.

Farms operated by *women* were distributed fairly evenly throughout the U.S. Female-operated farms were only about half as likely as all U.S. farms to specialize in cash grains and were more likely than all U.S. farms to raise livestock or high-value crops.

Operator Age & Farm Tenure

Most minority farm operators are older than the average for U.S. farm operators. This is especially true for Black and Japanese farmers, for whom the entry rate of young farmers has been low for many years. The average age of *Black* operators was 59 years, and 38 percent of all Black farmers were 65 years or older, making Black farm operators older on average than other minority groups and U.S. farm operators in general. *Asian and Pacific Islander* operators as a group also tended to be older than U.S. farm operators in general in 1992. They averaged 55 years of age, compared with 53 years for all operators, an average influenced heavily by the high average age of the Japanese. About 30 percent were at least 65 years of age, compared with 25 percent of all U.S. operators.

Average age among some minorities, however, remained at or below the average for all U.S. operators in 1992. With only 20 percent at least 65 years old, *American Indian* opera-

tors were slightly younger, on average, than U.S. farm operators in general. Hispanic operators' average age matched the U.S. average for farm operators at 53, but only 22 percent were at least 65 years old, compared with the 25-percent average for all U.S. operators.

Female operators' average age was 58 years in 1992, about 5 years older than the U.S. average. About 36 percent of female operators were at least 65 years old, 11 percentage points higher than the U.S. average. This is primarily the result of the relatively large number who inherited their operations as widows. However, between 1982 and 1992 the number of early middle-aged women farmers increased.

Fifty-five percent of all U.S. farm operators reported farming as their principal occupation in 1992. Only 44 percent of *Black* farm operators reported farming as their principal occupation, which is compatible with their specialization in beef cattle—a sector with relatively flexible labor requirements that work well with an off-farm job. *American Indian* operators also reported farming as their principal occupation at a lower rate than the U.S. average—46 percent. About half of *Hispanic* operators reported farming as their principal occupation, the same rate as *women* farm operators. Only *Asian and Pacific Islander* operators were more likely to report farming as their major occupation—62 percent—than U.S. operators in general, reflecting their more frequently large-scale operations.

The tenure pattern of minority farmers differed somewhat from the average for all U.S. farms. Minority farmers were slightly more likely to own all the land they operated (ranging from 60 percent for *American Indian* operators to 62 percent for *Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians and Pacific Islanders*) than the average for all U.S. farmers (58 percent). All minority groups except for Asians and Pacific Islanders ranged slightly below the U.S. average (31 percent) for part ownership (own some land and lease some land)—from 24 to 28 percent—and varied around the U.S. average (11 percent) for tenants—from 11 to 15 percent. *Asians and Pacific Islanders*, in contrast, had a much higher tenancy rate—24 percent—and a much lower part-ownership rate—14 percent. *Women* farm operators displayed a different tenure pattern from minority and all U.S. farm operators—78 percent of women operators were full owners of their farms, with only 15 percent part owners and 7 percent tenants.

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the added disadvantage of outreach and program designs not always well-suited to their particular needs.

Addressing the Needs of Minority & Women Farmers

At the heart of the USDA Civil Rights Action Team (CRAT) report, *Civil Rights at the U.S. Department of Agriculture*, were 92 recommendations to address civil rights issues in the Department. Following the report's release on February 28, 1997, the Secretary appointed a new team, the Civil Rights Implementation Team (CRIT). The new team issued a report, *Civil Rights at the U.S. Department of Agriculture: One Year of Change*, in March 1998.

Fifty of the CRAT report's recommendations applied to the areas of program delivery and outreach to minority and women farmers. The President's fiscal-year 1999 budget includes nearly \$250 million to support civil rights initiatives at USDA. Of that sum, \$232 million (93 percent) is dedicated to improvement of program delivery and outreach. The Secretary has also submitted to Congress a proposal to repeal provisions in the 1996 Farm Act that bar farmers who have received a debt write-down from receiving further Federal farm loans. The legislative proposal developed by CRIT also includes provisions for improved access to credit in rural housing and conservation programs, as well.

Modernizing USDA's Farm Service Agency county committee system was a priority in the Department's efforts to respond to charges of discrimination in program delivery. These local, farmer-elected committees have been the focus of much of the criticism aimed at USDA by minority farmers. Legislative proposals developed by CRIT provide for conversion of the locally hired staff of these committees to Federal status. The legislative proposal also includes language to add new voting members to the county committees, which have often under-represented minority and women farmers.

Ending any current discriminatory treatment in USDA programs has been another priority. The Secretary formally halted all 4,500 pending USDA farm foreclosures,

Selected Characteristics of Minority and Women Farm Operators

Group	Farms	Share of all U.S. farms	Land per farm	Sales per farm	Average age of operator	Farming reported as major occupation
	Number	Percent	Acres	Dollars	Years	Percent
Nonwhite operators	43,487	2.3	1,270	70,659	55	48.1
Black	18,816	1.0	123	19,431	59	44.0
American Indian	8,346	0.4	5,791	49,338	52	45.9
Asian or Pacific Islander	8,096	0.4	140	192,156	55	62.0
Other ¹	8,229	0.4	421	89,887	51	45.7
Hispanic operators ²	20,956	1.1	591	115,200	53	49.7
Female operators ²	145,156	7.5	309	35,281	58	50.6
All U.S. operators	1,925,300	100.0	491	84,459	53	54.7

1. Primarily limited to persons native to or of ancestry from Mexico, the Caribbean, and Central and South America. 2. Hispanic and female operators may be of any race.

Source: 1992 Census of Agriculture.

Economic Research Service, USDA

and following review of more than 70 percent of the cases by late February 1998, has held more than 100 for further civil rights investigation. CRAT also recommended settlement of all—more than 1,000—pending program discrimination cases within 4 months. However, many of these settlements were delayed because CRIT found that investigations, some dating back to the early 1980's, had been neglected following the 1983 disbanding of the USDA civil rights investigative unit.

Failure to meet the recommended schedule for settling this backlog contributed to the filing of a class action lawsuit by a group of Black farmers in August 1997. The suit alleges USDA discriminated against all Black farmers from 1983 until the issuing of USDA's civil rights report in February 1997. The Department of Justice settled four individual complaints encompassed in the class action through mediation in October 1997, with payment of damages totaling \$1.2 million. The remaining farmers requested alternative dispute resolution, and at the urging of a Federal judge, USDA agreed to a mediation process in December 1997, to last 6 months, that will attempt to settle the complaints contained in the class action suit. Legal barriers, such as statute-of-limitations restrictions on some of the older complaints, are being addressed with the assistance of the Department of Justice and the White House and may require legislation to resolve.

CRAT also adopted a recommendation suggested by minority farm advocates to establish a voluntary register of minority farmers. The register would help track and target programs to address the loss of minority-owned farmland. As developed by CRIT, it will include minority farm operators, whether or not they own land, and minority farmland owners, whether or not they operate a farm. The list will include all minority, racial, and ethnic groups who have experienced declining numbers of farmers and/or loss of land ownership, or whose numbers are disproportionately small among farm operators and farmland owners.

To improve USDA's outreach to minorities and other underserved groups, the Secretary of Agriculture established an Office of Outreach in August 1997. The office is developing a 5-year strategic plan—working with individual agencies and soon-to-be-formed State and national outreach councils, as well as tribal governments and the Department of the Interior—to help tailor outreach efforts to local customer and program delivery needs. The Office of Outreach will maintain the register of minority farm operators and has assumed responsibility for the Outreach and Technical Assistance to Socially Disadvantaged Farmers (2501) program.

Counting Minority & Women Farmers

Both census of agriculture and census of population data are used to examine characteristics of minority operators. Compared with other sources of data on minority farmers, census data extend further into the past and provide reliable statistics for very small minorities, particularly at the State level. Obtaining an accurate count of minority farmers can be difficult, since some of the groups overlap in the census.

The census of agriculture differentiates by race among Black, American Indian, Asian or Pacific Islander, and "other." An ethnicity designation allows for recording Hispanic operators, but some Hispanic operators are also included in the non-White count, since Hispanics may be of any race. Similarly, women farmers may be included in the non-White and Hispanic counts. Note that the Census Bureau counts only one, primary operator per farm in the census of agriculture; it does not classify women who farm alongside their husbands as operators, unless they are the primary operators. Nor does it tally more than one operator in partnerships.

The census of population records data only on individuals' principal occupations. Therefore, it does not get a count of people who farm as a secondary job. The farmer count in the population census is below that of the agriculture census. However, the population census may record more than one operator per farm where spouses or grown children are partners in the work, although information on farm characteristics is not available.

The population census also allows for greater differentiation of ethnicity in all parts of the U.S. than does the census of agriculture. For example, individuals responding to the popu-

lation survey could identify themselves as Japanese, Chinese, Hmong, or Asian Indian, among others, within the larger category of Asian and Pacific Islander. The same holds true for other ethnic and racial categories.

The census of agriculture defines a farm based on average annual sales. Currently, any operation with sales of at least \$1,000 in the census year, or which would normally have had such sales, is counted as a farm. Changing that definition, as was recently considered by the U.S. Bureau of the Census, could have a large impact on the count of minority-operated farms. For example, raising the sales cutoff in the farm definition to \$10,000, as originally planned by Census Bureau, would have reduced the count of all U.S. farms by 47 percent. For Black operators, however, it would have reduced the count by 76 percent, for American Indian operators by 64 percent, for Hispanic operators by 60 percent, and for women operators by 65 percent.

As a result of recommendations by the USDA Civil Rights Action Team, the 1997 Census of Agriculture—administered for the first time by USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS)—will make additional efforts to ensure accurate counting of minority farms. The number of minority farm operators on the mailing list for the census has been increased, and NASS has contacted minority operators who reported in 1992 for assistance in identifying minority farmers who were missed in the last census. Moreover, to more accurately reflect the number of American Indian farms, a newly designed procedure will estimate the number of American Indian farm operators on each reservation, ending the convention of counting each reservation as a single farm.

The 2501 program was established by the 1987 Agricultural Credit Act to improve the financial viability of farms operated by minority and women farmers. The President's fiscal-year 1999 budget requests funding for the 2501 program at the authorized level of \$10 million. Through the efforts of CRIT, the 1999 request also includes increases for other targeted direct and technical assistance programs for underserved groups, especially minority and women farmers.

USDA has also committed to expanding the capacities of land-grant and other uni-

versities and colleges that have historically served minority populations. CRAT recommended that additional resources to support research, extension, and technical assistance programs be targeted to the 17 historically Black 1890 land-grant colleges and universities and to Tuskegee University, and to the 29 tribal 1994 land-grant colleges. The Department's fiscal-year 1999 budget proposal includes \$18 million targeted to minority-serving education institutions.

Finally, CRAT recommended that USDA increase its attention to the needs of farmworkers, who are predominantly Hispanic and other minorities. The Department's focus will be to expand current programs and explore new initiatives related to pesticide safety. In the fiscal-year 2000 bud-

get proposal, \$5.5 million has been requested for Cooperative State Research, Extension, and Education Service programs for farmworkers, as well as \$3.4 million for the Natural Resources Conservation Service to be used in environmental justice programs, which will benefit farmworkers. The Secretary of Agriculture has also initiated efforts to establish a closer working partnership with the Department of Labor on farmworker issues.

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The full reports of USDA's Civil Rights Action Team and Civil Rights Implementation Team are available on the internet at <http://www.usda.gov/news/civil>